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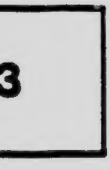

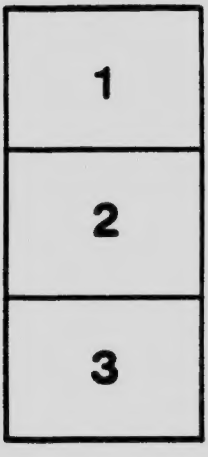

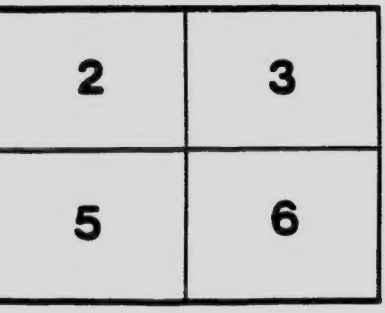

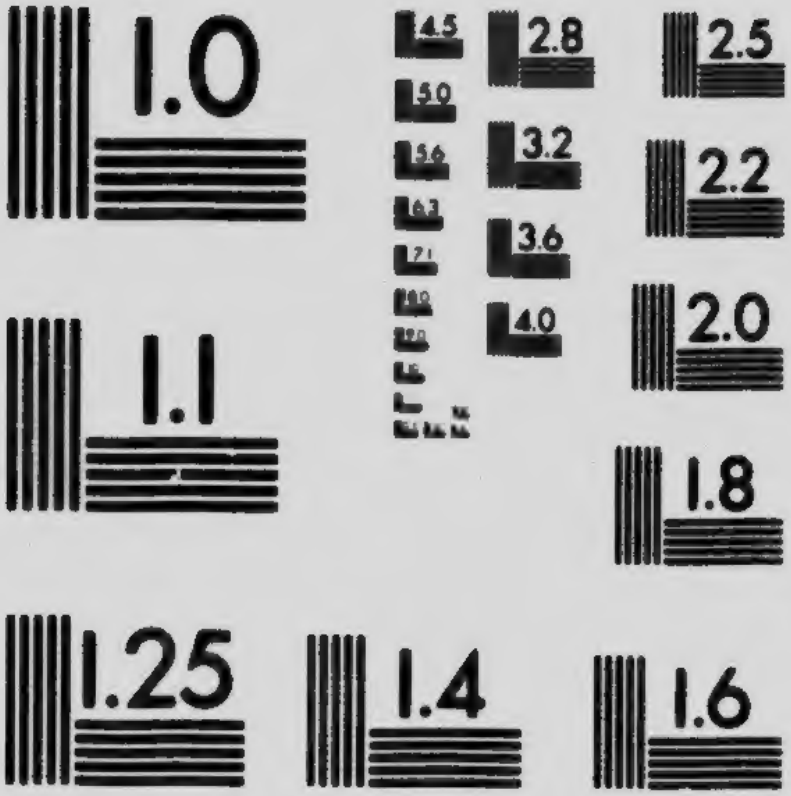

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THE USE OF A PUBLIC LIBRARY BY A PUBLIC MAN

BY

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THE USE OF A PUBLIC LIBRARY BY A PUBLIC MAN.

By William Renwick Riddell, LL.D., F. R. Hist. Soc., etc., Justice of the Supreme Court of Ontario.

In every discussion it is a very useful rule in the first place to define your terms. Much of the difficulty experienced by every community or association in conducting its affairs arises from the different meanings attached by different members to the same expression; no small part of the innumerable disputes in society, politics, what not, comes from that source, and its baneful effects are not unknown even in the Courts of Law.

Therefore, let me begin by telling what, in my conception of the terms, is meant by a Public Man; and indeed, when my subject was first assigned to me, my first thought was "what does it mean?"

A Public Ma.. not the same, it will be at once admitted, as a Publican, whether that much a used word be used as in the authorized version of the New Testament, or in the ordinary sense of to-day's familiar converse.

Nor is he simply one who is much before the public—Harry Thaw was that and Guiteau—much less is he one who lives off—and on—the public, like—but I had better not give examples, at least of the present day.

A Public Man is a man holding a position of general influence or authority, such a position that its occupant is to be expected to teach the people, to inform them, to lead by precept at least if not by example. He is a participant in public affairs, whether of the Dominion, the Province or the Municipality, or he is the professor, the lecturer, the teacher of the adult or the adolescent.

A Public Library is, I take it, a library either owned by the public or open to the public, not a library like that at Osgoode Hall or the Academy of Medicine owned by the Law Society or the Medical Association from which the layman is excluded, at the doors of which the uninitiated reads: *Procul, O procul este, profani.* At the Public Library the more the merrier and all are welcomed who are moderately clean, not wholly in rags and with at least rudimentary notions of decency in conduct and language.

I thought at first that the preposition "by" in the title of my subject was a *lapsus calami* for "to"; but mature consideration convinces me that the former preposition has been deliberately adopted to express the wider meaning, including in its connotation the import of the latter. The use of a library by anyone must be largely determined by its use to him.

Accordingly my subject naturally divides itself into two heads: and that is more than can be said of all texts: the heads under which the discussion of many is arranged do not always appear natural—at least to the hearer.

First, why should the Public Man use the library? and second, how?

Many Public Men do not require to use a library at all: the heaven-born statesman with a common school education who knows it all, who does not need the lessons of history (which is said to be but philosophy teaching by examples) for w did those know who lived in former ages and before the telephone and moving pictures? The experience of Greece and Rome, of mediæval France and Germany, of the Old Land in her centuries of conflict and experiment, what has that to do with problems in Canada and in the present? Nor does that statesman need a

library who thinks only of carrying elections and keeping his own side in, the other side out—although they did know something about winning elections in old Rome, or Cicero was a terrific liar.

The judge whose knowledge and whose sympathies are bounded by the calf-bound volumes of reports, the digests and statutes can receive no assistance from the books in the Public Library; nor can the lawyer, intent only on making money, increasing his practice and winning in his litigation.

What Public Men should, indeed must, use a Public Library is indicated by showing who need not—he who agrees with Cicero that "Nothing is more delightful than universal information," he who understands that there is a good deal of human nature in man and that human nature does not change in its essence but only in its accidents with the changing suns, he who loves his country and his people and thinks he serves them best by studying and faithfully applying the lessons of history, past or contemporary, natural, political, economical, to the present of his own land; he who would know what errors to avoid, what examples to follow and to better, he who knows that man does not live by bread alone or by arithmetic alone, he who believes "*Studia abeunt in mores*" (to use the motto of my old college)—he cannot live in peace without the library, and unless he is quite differently placed financially from all of his kind whom I have met, he must make us. a Public Library.

How? The answer to that question should give no trouble.

The Public Man must ever bear in mind that he is a missionary, and like the great Apostle of the Gentiles he should magnify his office—glory in his office—*ministerium meum honorificabo* as the Vulgate has it. But that does not imply that he should act as though the library existed for him alone. In consulting the books of a reference library he may take most copious notes, but he ought not to destroy the books themselves. It is all right many think, even laudable, to turn down the leaves or corners, or to underline passages or to score the margin with lead pencil—I have seen a former Vice-Chancellor do that. But the reader should draw the line at tearing the leaves or ruining the binding. The former eminently proper practice has the advantage of showing future readers what someone before them has thought to be of interest, it may direct an enquirer to what he is seeking, and it has the incidental advantage of stirring up the library staff and giving them something to do in erasing the pencillings—this moreover is a change in the dull monotony of library work. It may indeed be that an unreasonable librarian will object to having his books thus defaced—those we have at Osgoode Hall do—but a little care will generally enable the reader to avoid detection.

Marginal notes in pencil have the same advantages, and the additional one of giving *in*valuable information to those who may use the book afterwards.

So, too, when a book is found to be of interest and is likely to be asked for by many persons, a borrower should not consider himself bound too strictly by the rules governing return. The person who has the book, remembering that possession is nine points of the law, should continue that possession. If he has anything else upon which to spend his time he should not waste it upon the book he has borrowed, especially if it is in great but temporary demand. Let him magnify his office and not give way to foolish sentiment. It is more than likely that most of those desiring to read the book do not really know what they want it for, that they would not derive much if any benefit from it anyway, and in any event waiting will be an excellent lesson for them in patience. The old lilt is to be borne in mind:

Patience is a virtue,
Possess it if you can,
Seldom found in woman
And never found in man.

I remember some time ago going down the street of a certain city about half past nine in the morning, when I met a very distinguished member of the legal profession, one whom his confreres delighted to honour and whom they afterwards advanced to the highest office in their gift. He was using language which I would not venture to employ in this gathering, language vivid, picturesque, pure Anglo-Saxon, that is, pure from the philological standpoint if not from the point of view of the ultra-fastidious. A very busy man, he had desired to consult a book in the city library before beginning the day's grind in his office and had found that the library did not open till ten. His remarks, when denuded of immaterial and irrelevant ornamentation, were in substance these: the Public Schools open at nine, every law office opens at nine, why cannot a public convenience like a library open at least as early? If it is to be of any use to me it must be open before ten. The trial courts begin at ten or earlier: some of the Courts at Osgoode Hall begin at ten: I must have my morning office work over before I go to court, and a book I cannot see before ten may for me as well be non-existent. I expostulated with him as a friend should—that is one of the privileges of friendship which should never become atrophied for want of use. I pointed out that the library was open till all hours of the night and should not be expected to open early in the morning; his language took on a lurid tinge, he had not known that he wanted to see the book till he was looking up a subject the night before and he had to see the book before he could undertake his case in the morning; if people wanted to browse round libraries at night when they should be at home he supposed that provision must be made for them, but why should that prevent provision being made for those who wanted to consult the books at the right time? He had me there, I could not answer; but it was not necessary that I should. My friend should have remembered (as I try to do) that regulations must be made for the staff of every institution of any size public or private; that with the best intentions in the world these regulations naturally tend to meet the convenience of the staff. Now that no public servant ever lived (at least ever lived long as a public servant) who constantly consulted the convenience of the public rather than that of his colleagues and himself. It really does not take very many hours for the public servant to pay for all the salary he gets, anyway.

This is no new story. The notorious Nero was petitioned by the judges of his time to increase their number as they could not overtake the work. Making enquiry into the matter he found that the judges took some weeks vacation each year, and the ingrained brute said: "No I cannot increase your number but I *can* permit you to give up your vacation, and I will." Some such line as this was once played by Sir Oliver Mowat on an estimable class of public servants.

I have met many citizens who are as unreasonable as my friend, but I never met anyone (not employed in the library) who had a different view, and it may sometimes perhaps be worth while for libraries to consider the reasonable wishes of even such unreasonable people.

But in any case, my friend took the proper course. He blamed the regulation to me who was and am entirely innocent: he did not trouble to take the matter up with those who had made it and could unmake it. That is always the right way. It is one of the inalienable privileges of a free man, and of all women, bond or free, to grumble at what they do not like, or think they do not like. It is a luxury; and why should anyone deprive himself of the privilege and luxury by going to anyone who could destroy the cause? Of course, library boards and librarians are notoriously anxious to do their best for the public. They desire that their institution shall do the most good possible and in the most convenient

way. They have no axe to grind or end to achieve which makes them antagonistic to the people at large. If they were spoken to, they might either explain the necessity for the rule to the satisfaction of the most exigent or remove the objection entirely by a suitable change. But then what would the grumbler do?

Others I have heard complaining of regulations as to checking coats, hats, umbrellas, etc., at the door. This is all wrong. If there be such a regulation it should be obeyed: sometimes, indeed, the checker is unduly rigid and particular, but you cannot get the wisdom of Solomon for $10 a week. If the rule is that overcoats and umbrellas are to be checked, the visitor to a library should see to it that he has an overcoat and umbrella to be checked—rules must be obeyed.

In an American Criminal Court, it is said that an accused was ordered to hold up his right hand; he answered that he had lost his right arm. Then he was told to hold up his left hand; that was equally impossible from a rheumatic affection, "Well then," cried the Clerk, "hold up your foot, you've got to hold up something in this Court."

Loud talking or—what is, if anything, more irritating—loud whispering will be indulged in by those who desire to call attention to themselves. They will certainly succeed by this means even if the attention is not such as would be considered flattering, or the comment not loud but deep, complimentary. But how much better to be conspicuous even though notoriety does not bring esteem or respect than to be absolutely unknown.

Moreover, is this not a free country? And is not every man as good as his neighbour or even better? Prancing round a library in the midst of studious readers, making a great clatter, loudly and imperiously calling for what one wants, are these not all signs of independence, sometimes of importance?

It is said that an Irishman seeing a pompous person walking down the street accosted him with the question, "Are ye anny wan of anny importance, Sorr?" He would not have needed to ask such a question had the consequential one been talking.

And are not a regard for the comfort of others, a deference to the need for quiet which others have, a courtesy which one would show in decent society toward even the crotchets of his neighbours—are all these not the signs of an undue sycophancy, of an absence of sturdy individuality and independence, and of an unworthy desire to please shown only by the decadent?

That by conduct of this kind one will make himself disliked, even detested by the staff of a library is a mere detail, scarcely worth considering if at all. Are the librarian and all his assistants not paid to wait upon the public? do they not, therefore, feed on the public? are they not mere servants of the public? and why should the master trouble himself about what his servants think of him?

By a careful observance of these suggestions a public library can become a model—of a certain kind.

To recapitulate, let the library in its hours, its rules, etc., be considerate, first of the convenience of the staff and not of that of the public, then let the public man who should be an example to others break all the rules he conveniently can, presume on his standing and influence to make everything await and serve his convenience, let him grumble and complain to everyone of what does not exactly suit him, and at all hazards avoid going to the right quarter for the rectification of what he considers improper or inadvisable, and it will not be long before the library becomes a model of all that should be avoided.

And now to be serious.

There are the two sides of the question to be considered—how the library can be of most use to the public man and how the public man may make the most of what the library has to offer.

The selection of books must, of course, depend largely on the funds at the disposal of the librarian, and upon his judgment: but it is not enough to have a splendid collection o' volumes. The best means possible must be taken to make known the treasures of the library, and that is not simply the drawing up of a catalogue reserved for the use of the library staff. True the librarian must either himself be, or he must have someone who is, an encyclopedia of the library, who can give, if not immediate, at least speedy information as to the contents of the shelves. But that is not enough, one pursuing an investigation in the only hours available to many will come across some matter requiring elucidation. He will desire to know if there is a book dealing with the matter: and if he has a full catalogue by him he can determine that at once, leave the matter there if there is, pursue it along such lines as are otherwise available to him if there is not. No one who has not had the experience can appreciate the annoyance and mortification felt by a student (say of history) when after he has spent hours of diligent investigation along collateral lines he finds some matter in which he takes an interest fully discussed in some work of which he was ignorant.

The catalogue should be topical as well as alphabetical. This implies not only brain, but also great general intelligence on the part of the cataloguer. In some catalogues one is irresistibly reminded of an indexer who wrote an item "Mind, great, Lord Mansfield's," the reference being to the statement "Lord Mansfield said he had a great mind to comm't the offender."

The titles of the books should be given as nearly in full as possible, and the date and number of the edition should never be omitted. Many times in my own experience I, having one or more editions of a book, have attended the Public Library here to see if there were not other editions. That editions differ is well known. A classic instance is to be found in the editions of Blackstone's Commentaries of the Law of England. I would add another example– Howison's Sketches of Upper Canada (as to which see an article of mine in the Canadian Magazine for May, 1913, "Upper Canada in Early Times").

With such a beautiful and accurate catalogue as that recently issued by the Toronto Reference Library of books published in Canada before 1837 it seems almost ungracious to find fault. Be "faithful are the wounds of a friend": and in my view a catalogue like this which is intended to give information concerning a limited period, as a catalogue intended to give information concerning a limited subject, should (1) have the title page in full with the lines divided off by a /, (2) state the number of pages as well as the size of the volume, 8vo., 12mo., etc., and (3) (if the title page does not convey full information) have a short description of the contents. Let me give an example:

"'A / Visit / To The / Province of Upper Canada / in / 1819 / By James Strachan / Aberdeen / Printed by D. Chalmers & Co. / for James Strachan Aberdeen / Longman / Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, London, Oliver and / Boyd, Edinburgh: W. Turnbull, Glasgow / and E. Lesslie, Dundee / 1820. 8vo., half morocco, pp. V to VIII, 9 to 224: only edition, rare, but occasionally offered for sale by second-hand dealers."

James Strachan of Aberdeen, brother of the Reverend Dr. John Strachan (afterwards Anglican Bishop of Toronto) visited his brother in 1819, describes Upper Canada—chief topic of value, account of Gourlay and Joseph Brant. Gourlay characterizes the book as full of 'falsehoods, untruths and misrepresentations' concerning him and quotes with approval the Edinburgh *Scotsman's* statement that it is 'one of the most miserable attempts at travel writing' (Neptunian No. 26)."

I know that this implies both brains and wide information, but I also know

that the Toronto Library staff has both; and the same should be true of other libraries as well.

Then every opportunity should be given for the student to possess himself of the information the books contain. Suitable tables and chairs, a room reasonably well heated, ventilated, lighted, and free from obnoxious elements, human and non-human. Attendants, intelligent, active, willing, who recognize that the library exists for man, not man for the library, that they are the servants of the public, are paid by the public and should do their best for their paymaster—are a matter of course.

Rules, too, there must be, but these rules should be framed purely from the standpoint of the greatest public service. They must, too, be flexible—the more flexible according as those administering them and those to whom they are applied are the more intelligent. A cast-iron rule is all right when those who are to be entrusted with its administration are of cast-iron heads—or those to whom it is applied are of cast-iron morals or manners.

Mistakes will happen and any rule which will prevent mistakes will prevent much good. It is in most cases better to run the chance of a mistake occasionally than to be sure that the regulation will prevent a mistake indeed, but also may seriously interfere with the value of the institution to the public.

Suitable cataloguing, catalogues well distributed, intelligent attendants willing to serve, comfortable rooms, such tables and chairs as are needed, help to make a library a real public benefactor. All these I am glad to say we have in the superlative degree in our Reference Library.

Then the student has his duty as well—a willing and courteous obedience to regulations, a regard for the rights and feelings of others, whether library attendants or otherwise are to be required of every one entering a library, but the public man has something more which should be rendered.

Noblesse oblige, he who is a debtor more perhaps than others to the library should do all in his power to make the library a success, help the library in its beneficent public work. If he knows of books that should be in the library he should inform the librarian, if he sees regulations which are not quite the thing, which do not produce quite the best results, he should inform the librarian, not go around grumbling and finding fault. A library can do its best work only where there is co-operation between its managers and the best of its clients.

Of the Toronto Public Library I have never heard the slightest complaint, except the single one to which I have already referred —(because the "City" was Toronto)—and if a model is looked for—*circumspice*.